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MR. BERNARD SHAW AS A SOCIAL CRITIC.*

It may be admitted that Mr. Bernard Shaw is a somewhat questionable subject. Most respectable people fight shy of him—or at best, and not wishing to be harsh, they say frankly they do not understand him. I had an experience not long ago, going over to Europe. I noticed Shaw's "Man and Superman" passing from hand to hand in a certain group on the steamer; and as a friend had vainly tried to get the book for me before sailing, I looked on with a certain envy. Just before landing I fell into conversation with the leader of the party and asked him what they thought of the book. I fancied that whether they agreed or not with Shaw, they would be full of ideas; but he said they could make nothing of it—and should I like the book, for he had left it in his stateroom?

Two things embarrass us in reading this writer—at least two. One is that we do not know how to take him. Is he serious, we ask? The temptation is strong to think of him as saying smart things for the pleasure of saying them. He keeps us in a smile half or three quarters of the time we are reading him—often we laugh, sometimes we roar. He seems to take himself as little seriously as his readers. He says he is a "charlatan," yes, "a natural-born mountebank." What can we do with such a man except to enjoy his antics? Another difficulty is that what he says often shocks us. I do not mean merely our sense of the proprieties—any clown does that and it is a part of his humor—but our moral sense. Like a bull in a china shop, he strikes right and left at our current moral conceptions. He seems like a kind of anarchist in ethics—a deifier of license and arbitrary will. He says, either directly or through characters that we feel are his mouthpiece, that if we must choose between a race of athletes and a race of "good men," let us have the athletes; that as the age of faith has gone, so the age of reason has to go and the age of duty as well—the new evangelist must preach

* An address first given before the Society for Ethical Culture of Chicago in Handel Hall, April 14, 1907.

the repudiation of duty; that unless woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself, and since a duty to one's self is strictly no duty at all, therefore woman has to repudiate duty altogether. We do not know whether we are on our feet or on our heads after hearing such things—if we take them seriously at all. I remember coming on some of them in his “*Quintessence of Ibsenism*,” when making a study of Ibsen years ago, and concluding at least that here was no special inspiration for an ethical teacher. Indeed I have read nothing of Shaw since till recently: the bits about him or by him in the newspapers have simply puzzled or irritated or amused me as they have so many others; and as I am rather a prosaic person I felt no strong impulse to study a man who might after all be only joking. But curiosity got the better of me, and I will confess now in advance that gradually Shaw has taken on the proportions of a great man to my mind.

First, let me suggest what is, I think, the right cue for understanding Shaw. Underlying everything else is the fact that he is a Socialist—one of those fools or wise men (according to your point of view) who look for a new heaven and a new earth. Long ago, in a plain, straight economic essay, he made this clear.¹ He expects no good and no salvation from the individual scramble that is now named industrial order; he looks for a different order based on rational, coöperative, collective action. In a letter which prefaces “*Man and Superman*,” he says: “The vitality which places nourishment and children first, heaven and hell a somewhat remote second, and the health of society as an organic whole nowhere, may muddle successfully through the comparatively tribal stages of gregariousness; but in nineteenth-century nations and twentieth-century empires the determination of every man to be rich at all costs, and of every woman to be married at all costs, must, without a highly scientific social organization, produce a ruinous development of poverty, celibacy, prostitution, infant mortality, adult degen-

¹ In “*Fabian Essays*.”

eracy, and everything that wise men most dread. In short, there is no future for men, however brimming with crude vitality, who are neither intelligent nor politically educated enough to be Socialists." This is his platform to-day, as truly as ever before. The world, as he looks out upon it, is a painful spectacle to his eyes. Pity and indignation move him. He is not sentimental, as some writers are, but the facts grind his soul.

Yet there are those who are not uncomfortable at all. They do not seem to see the facts he sees, or they do not see them from his point of view. They talk of civilization, progress, wealth, liberal institutions, and so on. He does not like it and determines to make them uncomfortable. For a while he attempted to do this from a cart or band-wagon in Hyde Park; but the comfortable-minded were not generally there. Of late he has taken to writing books and plays and he has a wider audience. "It annoys me," he says, "to see people comfortable when they ought to be uncomfortable; and I insist on making them think in order to bring them to conviction of sin." "Annoys"—notice the word; he has the sensitive, artistic temperament. He is irritated, and he determines to irritate. He goes out of his way to do this; he does it of set purpose. His "Quintessence of Ibsenism" he says he purposely couched in the most provocative terms. In a recent book, "Dramatic Opinions and Essays," he remarks, "In this world, if you do not say a thing in an irritating way, you may just as well not say it at all, since nobody will trouble themselves about anything that does not trouble them." In other words, to say the truth simply and scientifically is not his object, nor does it determine his method or style; he wants to influence people, and he is not scrupulous as to the use of means, any more than many a preacher is. The fact is, Shaw is a preacher, though of his own kind; "my conscience is the genuine pulpit article," he tells us himself, half-banteringly; and in seeking to convince men of sin, righteousness and judgment to come I have become persuaded that he is one of the most serious men in this generation.

This view of him is borne out by what he says of art. Surely, he is an artist, a comic artist if you will, though a tragic artist, too; and neither the Philistine nor the Puritan can claim him;

and yet he pours scorn on "art for art's sake," and is a perfect foil, as some one has said, to his brilliant compatriot and contemporary, Oscar Wilde. The fact is, he has something to communicate through his art: art is only a vehicle for his overmastering idea. In an access of zeal he even calls himself a Puritan in this respect, and says that though he loves fine music and handsome buildings, if he found that they were becoming the instruments of a systematic idolatry of sensuousness, he would hold it good statesmanship to blow every cathedral in the world to pieces with dynamite, organ and all, without the least heed to the screams of the art critics and culture voluptuaries. "The pleasures of the senses I can sympathize with and share," he declares; "but the substitution of sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity and honesty is the very devil." In a word, art has an end beyond itself; and the object of Shaw's art in particular is to make men think, to make them uncomfortable, to convict them of sin.

If we bear all this in mind we are prepared for epigram, paradox, exaggerations, and numberless extravagances, just as from a good rousing preacher. If they arouse the attention, if they irritate and make men think, they serve their purpose: the truth lying back of them men will get, once thus pricked and prodded. But it would be a great mistake, because Mr. Shaw is serious, to take everything he says seriously—I mean, at its full face value. Here is where the art of interpretation comes in—and it is a delicate art. It is the same art that Matthew Arnold used to enlarge upon with such exquisite skill. It is the art of knowing when to touch an utterance lightly, and again when to press with all our weight. Dogma, scientific definition and statement is all equally important, every part essential and true, if true at all; but literature, the expression of moods and purposes, the mixture of emotion with thought, is a fluid thing, and to treat it as dogma, to press every word and sentence, may lead to outlandish and most unintended conclusions. For instance, in that early book of Shaw's, "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," he is very bold and brave in talking about the repudiation of duty—about woman's doing it as well. If we read it prosaically and dogmatically, *i.e.*, stupidly,

forgetting or not knowing that it is what the Germans call a *Tendenzschrift*, forgetting that, as the author himself tells us, he sets out to provoke us, we are likely—and especially self-respecting women are likely—to shut the book in disgust before we have read it very far. Really, however, what Shaw wishes to do is to suggest and urge a new duty for mankind; he wants us all, woman included, to live out our own life; it is Emerson against convention and conformity over again. But if we are to do this, we must, in the nature of the case, break more or less with old “duties.” Once there was a supposed “duty” to a king; suppose men had not repudiated that duty, where would republicanism and democracy be? Once there was a supposed “duty” to the church and the head of the church; suppose Luther had not defied the pope and the church, where would Protestantism be? Once it was the duty of slaves to obey their masters, and of wives to obey their husbands; and how was progress possible but by renouncing these duties? If duty is one of the greatest things in the world, we must remember that it may be also one of the meanest. It may be a kind of sly putting of an internal bond on a person’s soul and freedom, instead of an external one. Convince a man that it is his duty to do certain things for you, and you have no need to watch him—it becomes a very practical substitute for the police. There can be no doubt that the interest and trickery of the strong have often put duties on the weak. There is emancipation—manhood and womanhood—in throwing off these duties. This is the general thought, I take it, that Mr. Shaw has in mind in this little book. A new world, a new social order, he believes, is going to arise—one that will serve men, and every individual man, better than the old one has, and he wants life to be free for it and to be ready to renounce the ties that bind it to the old order. I state all this tamely, rationalistically, perhaps so as to make no particular impression on your minds; he states it irritatingly, exaggeratedly, sweepingly—and anybody who reads the book is put on pins and needles, until by thinking and squirming and self cross-questioning he gets at the real truth the author has in mind.

This is only an instance. No man can less afford to be taken

literally, dogmatically, than Mr. Shaw. We must make allowance for the preacher's overemphasis and absolutism, the mountebank's gyrations and wish to startle and confound, in almost all he writes. Probably Mr. Shaw would be himself the first to label with the gentle epithet of fool those who took literally every sentence.

And now let us see what he has to say of present society; later we may see what he has also to say of efforts to reform society. It would be vain to attempt to take you through all his plays, not to mention his novels, and pieces of criticism like "A Perfect Wagnerite." One play² is a burlesque on war, or rather on the romantic idea of war (and indeed on romanticism in general): we have a very unconventional picture of the ordinary soldier, to whom war is a trade like any other and who finds chocolate quite as practical as cartridges. War or soldiering, it is suggested, is the coward's act of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm's way when you are weak. Get your enemy at a disadvantage is its maxim, and never, on any account, fight him on equal terms,—with which thought we are left to ruminate, as to the truth or half-truth of it. Another play is a charming picture of an innocent, unsuspecting, trusting, thoroughly good woman—a gay and cheerful child, according to ordinary worldly standards—who yet is more powerful in tight places (off among some wild Moors in Africa) than the sword or the law or force of any kind, to keep the peace and straighten out the snarls of life. It is an altogether delightful piece, "Capt. Brassbound's Conversion," and if there were a hundred Lady Cicelys, a corresponding number of generals and judges and lawgivers could be spared by society for other more useful employments. Still another play³ portrays the exploitation of the poor in great cities and the entanglements it involves, the scruples it drowns and the baseness it leads to. It is the problem of "tainted money," treated fifteen or twenty years ago.

An equally sore spot in our civilization is touched in "Mrs.

² "Arms and the Man."

³ "Widowers' Houses."

Warren's Profession." We read something about it a couple of years ago in the New York despatches to our papers, when the authorities of that virtuous city forbade (or talked about forbidding) its presentation on the stage. One of our Chicago papers called it "dramatized immorality." To my mind, it is one of the most impressive, one of the most moral plays in our literature. There is not a line in it or a suggestion that stimulates passion. There is rather the odor of the grave, of rottenness and putrefaction and moral death about the systematized sexual looseness that is implied there rather than described. It is so much less seducing than plays and operas that are given on the stage every day, that one might be tempted to think that it was the respectable keepers of immoral houses that hounded on the critics and the papers against the play. Of course, its real offense is its graphic portrayal of how economic conditions may lead to and almost force a life of shame—and of how business enterprise and capital may make money off it. Society permits the daily demoralization of young people and old people who go to our places of amusement, but it cannot permit reflections on its own integrity and its complacent theory that everyone who will can earn an honest living. Sometimes earning an honest living means slow starvation—that is all. Every adult person, capable of reflection, ought to read this play. Shaw himself points the moral of it when he says that a society which desires to found itself on a high standard of integrity of character in its units should organize itself in such a fashion as to make it possible for all men and all women to maintain themselves in reasonable comfort without selling their affections or their convictions. Yes, he applies the truth also to the men—lawyers, doctors, clergymen and platform politicians—who are daily using their highest faculties to belie their real sentiments—and he declares that the shame of these men is greater than that of prostitute women!

The first play of Shaw's I read has a most unpromising title, "The Devil's Disciple." Shaw has not a sneaking but an open fondness for devils and rebels generally. He has a preface on "Diabolonian Ethics"—and you prepare yourself for some tremendous reversal of ordinary moral standards. Now Dick

Dudgeon does have a somewhat portentous air of irreverence about him, is a mocker, profane, loose, hates religion (*i.e.*, the Puritanic shadows of it), and he is satirical toward the law—but he can be sincere and genuine, and in various ways he shows that it is prudery, sanctimoniousness, cant that he really hates, not virtue. Indeed, he turns out to be a hero, and saves another man's (a clergyman's) life; is arrested and sentenced on the supposition that he is the other man. The man's wife thinks he has done all this out of love for her. And I really must quote his answer at length, it sounds so deep a note in Mr. Shaw's philosophy and comes so near the sublime in actual morality. Dick replies to her: "If I said—to please you—that I did what I did ever so little for your sake, I lied as men always lie to women. You know how much I have lived with worthless men—aye, and worthless women, too. Well, they could all rise to some sort of goodness when they were in love [the word "love" comes from him with true Puritan scorn]. That has taught me to set very little store by the goodness that only comes out red hot. What I did last night, I did in cold blood, caring not half so much for your husband, or [ruthlessly] for you [she droops, stricken], as I do for myself. I had no motive and no interest: all I can tell you is that when it came to the point whether I would take my neck out of the noose and put another man's into it, I could not do it. I don't know why not: I see myself as a fool for my pains; but I could not and I cannot." There, I say, is the height of morality. Indeed, take Dick for all in all, despite his profanity, irreverence, and supposably lax morals, he is the soundest, wholesomest, yes, most religious character in the play—and the fighting preacher and General Burgoyne are no mean seconds. The conventional bad and the real good lying behind it—that is another of Shaw's points of view. Do not judge after the seeing of your eyes, and the hearing of your ears—that is the moral of it.

All this comes roughly under the head of criticism of society as it is. But there are other plays that seem directed, more properly speaking, against half-fledged efforts and proposals to reform society. I know not how otherwise (despite Mr.

Shaw's explanations) to describe the singular play called "The Philanderer." It is the picture of an Ibsen Club and of the so-called "new woman." There are two of these creatures, or rather three—and each is more terrible, or at least repulsive, than the other. If Shaw wanted to throw scorn on the whole movement, he could not have done better. But probably what he really wanted to do was to show the grotesque form which ideas may take on when people have not the mind or the character really to appropriate them. They have certain glimmerings, they assume certain attitudes and adopt certain phrases—that is all; they are not ennobled, they become ridiculous. One thinks of characters in Ibsen's "The Wild Duck," and of the spouting revolutionary heroes and friends of brotherhood whom Heine satirized. Perhaps in no better way does Shaw show that he is greater than any party or movement—that he keeps his mental and moral integrity. He stands for his ideas, not for the foolish, unripe followers of them.

In "Man and Superman," where as elsewhere he makes socialistic thrusts, he also makes thrusts at socialism—*i. e.*, at the grotesque forms which socialism sometimes takes. There is a group of brigands in the Spanish mountains near the Mediterranean; they are made up of an Anarchist, three Social-Democrats, who are not on speaking terms, besides gentlemen and Christians. A London chauffeur with his chief comes on them, or is held up by them, as they are having a discussion. The reformers contradict one another and utter each his appropriate stock phrases—and the chauffeur says, "Are we 'avin' a pleasure trip in the mountains, or are we at a Socialist meetin'?" There are other gibes. When soldiers threaten descent on the brigands, the Anarchist exclaims:

"Fools, the state is above to crush you, because you spared it at the prompting of the political hangers-on of the bourgeoisie." The sulky Social-Democrat starts in, "On the contrary, only capturing the State machine——," when the Anarchist retorts, "It is going to capture you." Then the rowdy Social-Democrat exclaims, "Ow, chuck it. Wot are we 'ere for? Wot are we wytin' for?" and the captain of the band says between his teeth, "Go on. Talk politics, you idiots: nothing sounds more

respectable,"—in which last remark I fear we have a reflection of the mind of philosopher Shaw himself.

Criticism on reformers in a finer and more delicate vein we find in "Candida." It is a very genial portrait that is drawn there of the Christian Socialist preacher. He is truthful, fearless, plain-spoken about evil-doing and with evil-doers, with oceans of energy and enthusiasm—withal a great orator and master of flowing speech. So clear is his perception of reality that he prefers a scoundrel self-confessed to a model employer, made so by necessity and boasting of it. He would be almost perfect, from a reformer's point of view, but for a perfection beyond him, vaguely, incoherently hinted at by a young poet-dreamer. The preacher's wife loves him, pets him and studiously cares for him, but somehow she misses something, it would be very hard to say what, but that she has a glimpse of it in this frail, awkward youth, half-angel and half-child—perhaps I might put it, absolute reality, the absence of all self-deception. Once she claims her husband's attention and expostulates with him about his overworking. "What's the use," she says, "in this perpetual lecturing and talking? It does no good: people don't mind what you say; they agree with you and then do just the opposite. They come to you as to a play, you preach so splendidly. They are all in love with you, and you are in love with preaching, because you do it so beautifully. You think it's all enthusiasm for the kingdom of heaven on earth; and so do they. You dear silly!" Perhaps there never was a finer analysis (miserably condensed as I have given it) of the subtle temptations of a preacher, whether Socialist or any other kind. The dangers of oratory are very great. One feels so good, one *is* so good for the time—and one with many speeches may multiply those times, until one has an almost continually swimming consciousness that he is good, while as to the reality he may know nothing. Nay, one comes to live in words, phrases, rhetoric. This clergyman has at one time occasion to speak of his feeling for his wife, and tells her with measured and mournful tenderness that she is his "greatest treasure on earth"—whereat she grows cold, seeing that he is yielding to his orator's instinct and treating her as if she were the audience at a Guild

meeting. In the young poet she feels none of this ; and he truthfully divines her, "a woman with a great soul, craving for reality, truth, freedom and being fed on metaphors, sermons, stale perorations, mere rhetoric." Hence all the elements of a domestic tragedy—which is happily avoided, I need not explain how. But the point is that in Shaw's scales even the high-minded and fearless Socialist preacher is tried and found wanting. Something more than eloquence and oratory, something like what we may call reality and character, are necessary to bring in the kingdom of heaven.

But Shaw goes further and is more sweeping yet. He sometimes flouts ideals, but no man is more idealistic. He holds up standards for socialism, for democracy itself. Heine compared himself to a court jester ; Shaw is confessedly critic. "Even Louis XI," he says, "had to tolerate his confessor, standing for the eternal against the temporal throne. Democracy has now handed the scepter of the despot to the sovereign people ; but they too must have their confessor, whom they call critic." Shaw is not afraid to tell the new monarch what he thinks is the truth. He sees demagogues in democracy, and he lashes them like any conservative. He does not idealize working people or the tramp. In "Man and Superman" he allows the Devil, who has been walking up and down the earth, to say, "I saw a man die : he was a London bricklayer's laborer with seven children. He left seventeen pounds club-money ; and his wife spent it all on his funeral and went into the workhouse with the children next day. She would not have spent seven pence on her children's schooling—the law had to force her to let them be taught gratuitously ; but on death she spent all she had." He makes John Tanner, in "The Revolutionists' Handbook," say that the tramp who would like a million of money does not take the trouble to earn ten shillings. The democracy lacks energy, will. In a kind of bitterness, Tanner says, "It need not be denied that if we all struggled bravely to the end of the reformer's paths we should improve the world prodigiously. But there is no more hope in that 'If' than in the equally plausible assurance that if the sky falls we shall all catch larks. We are not going to tread those paths : we have not

sufficient energy. We do not desire the end enough: indeed in most cases we do not effectively desire it at all." Brains are wanting, too. Tanner points to the Fabian Society, with its peaceful, constitutional, moral, economic policy of Socialism, needing nothing for its bloodless and benevolent realization except that the English people shall understand it and approve it. The fact is, says Shaw in his own name (in "The Perfect Wagnerite"), what we have to deal with is a multitude of men, some of them great rascals, some of them great statesmen, others both, with a vast majority capable of managing their personal affairs, but not of comprehending social organization, or grappling with the problems created by their association in enormous numbers. It is a day of great nations, even of great empires: Shaw sees the tendency and its inevitableness. He knows that there are no parochial solutions of social questions, that the parts of a nation or empire are so interrelated that a social policy must cover the whole. But where are the statesmen for such task, above all how are they to be got in a democracy, where statesmen do not elect themselves, but have to be elected?

Shaw speaks sometimes like a disillusioned man—it is almost painful to read him. Socialism, as he conceives it, is a problem of organization—a far higher, greater, more delicate problem than that of ordinary political administration; but it seems as if he had lost faith in the power of modern democratic societies or of any existing societies, to accomplish that work of organization. Not only does he confess in general "man's limited political capacity," but he has ironical reflections on the way "the swinish multitude" in England put the aristocrats again into power in 1885, and kept them there, I may add, two decades. The populace thereby admitted itself unfit to govern, he says,—and through Tanner as his mouthpiece he makes bold to affirm that the man is yet to be found who, having any practical experience of proletarian democracy, has any belief in its capacity for solving great political problems, or even for doing ordinary parochial work intelligently and economically. I should perhaps say that Shaw has been a vestryman himself and does not quite talk in the air. The faith in "univer-

sal suffrage" as a political panacea arose, he tells us, under despotisms and oligarchies—and it withers the moment it is exposed to practical trial, because democracy cannot rise above the level of the human material of which its voters are made. It is a sad *impasse*—the aristocracy unwilling, the democracy incapable—yes, the aristocracy, "these college passmen, these well-groomed Algys and Bobbies, these cricketers to whom age brings golf instead of wisdom," incapable, too. Indeed, Shaw gives up all hope of progress under present conditions. He has a terrible chapter on "The Conceit of Civilization"—it reads like blank pessimism. He even raises the question whether there has been any progress in historic time. The title of one chapter in Tanner's "Revolutionists' Handbook" is "Progress an Illusion." We must frankly give up the notion, it is urged, that man as he exists is capable of net progress. There may be bustling activity, oscillations of the pendulum, action and reaction, but no real advance—while man remains as he is there can be no progress beyond the point already attained. With a scorn equal to that of Carlyle, who used to characterize the millions of British population as mostly fools, Shaw says in "The Perfect Wagnerite": "the majority of men at present in Europe have no business to be alive, and no serious progress will be made until we address ourselves earnestly and scientifically to the task of producing trustworthy human material for society."

Has this man no outlook then, we ask? Is his Socialism a mirage? Has he given us a criticism of life and of democracy from the starting-point of a nonentity? Is he simply one more despairing, undone mortal, crying, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," and only finding it merrier to laugh than to cry?

To answer these questions would take us a long way—and I would only ask those who are interested in the matter to read carefully "Man and Superman," particularly the part that is not put upon the stage, namely the dialogue in Hell in Act III, and observe Mr. Shaw's peculiar views of marriage. Ultimately, Shaw is not at all a pessimist, but rather an audacious optimist.

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